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SUBJECT: SENIOR COORDINATOR FOR IRAQI REFUGEES FOLEY MEETS  
FRENCH MFA OFFICIALS, 31 MARCH 2008

REF: STATE 30028

¶1. (SBU) Summary: French MFA officials told Senior Coordinator for Iraqi Refugees James Foley on March 31 that France expects to receive perhaps 500 Iraqi refugees this year via UNHCR referrals in Jordan and Syria as well as processed directly by the French embassy in Baghdad. Defining criteria for these and other refugees remains problematic, however, as the French seek to balance pressure from French religious groups to favor Christian Iraqis with an ingrained tendency to apply an approach focusing on those at greatest risk, who have existing ties to France, or who would most easily integrate once resettled. Although FM Kouchner intends to raise the refugee issue at the April 22 Iraq neighbors meeting in Kuwait, the response from this group of MFA officials was tepid to the idea of increasing bilateral assistance to refugees in the region and skeptical in terms of increased EU assistance in the near term. End summary

¶2. (SBU) Senior Coordinator for Iraqi Refugees James Foley met with French MFA officials March 31 to discuss French policy for dealing with Iraqi refugees and to request French help in terms of increased bilateral and EU assistance for Iraqi refugees in the region. French FM Kouchner's adviser for crisis and humanitarian situations Eric Chevallier was unable to attend at the last minute. Kouchner's adviser on NEA affairs Christophe Bigot led the meeting on the French side accompanied by deputy director of the IO bureau equivalent Marc Giacomini and Iraq desk officer Olivier Masseret. PolMinCouns and poloff joined Foley on the U.S. side.

¶3. (SBU) Bigot started by saying that France expected to receive perhaps 500 Iraqi refugees this year, including 100 from Jordan and Syria that France has already accepted based on UNHCR referrals and 400 others drawn from refugee populations in Jordan and Syria as well as Iraqis processed by their embassy in Baghdad. (Comment: The MFA, when

later pressed for a more precise breakdown, including whether Christians would be favored, declined to do so. End comment) He explained the difficulty France has faced in defining criteria for accepting refugees, noting that the GOF has tended to favor refugees likely to integrate well into French society, i.e., due to their language ability, the likelihood they would find gainful employment, and family ties. Giacomini added that the GOF and UNHCR had disagreed about the applicability of the 1951 convention on refugees to many who had fled to Jordan and Syria, with the net result that France had agreed so far only to receive about 100. Masseret said that the French embassy in Baghdad, because of personnel and security-related constraints, was focusing exclusively on those cases in which the applicants were "especially threatened," had ties to France, and a demonstrated French language ability. He suggested that the eventual opening of the embassy office in Irbil could facilitate increased processing in-country.

¶4. (SBU) Bigot underscored continuing French concerns about singling out certain categories over others. This inevitably raised the "problematic" of the Chaldean Christians. He said the GOF has heard arguments that the Chaldean community was "more or less" vulnerable but found these claims hard to evaluate definitively, even in the wake of the kidnapping and murder earlier this year of the Chaldean archbishop of Mosul. Bigot referred to pressure on the GOF by Christian groups in France to help the Chaldeans and other Christian communities in the Middle East.

PARIS 00000681 002 OF 003

¶5. (SBU) Foley provided an overview of USG efforts vis-a-vis resettlement in the U.S. as well as helping the UNHCR and other international agencies/NGOs in the field cope with the sizable refugee populations in neighboring countries. He contrasted the infrastructure in place to receive refugees in Jordan and Syria with Lebanon, where until recently Iraqi refugees were faced with the choice of repatriation or imprisonment. When Giacomini asked about International Organization for Migration efforts to help resettle returning refugees in "safe zones" inside Iraq, Foley answered that the USG supports IOM and UNHCR efforts on behalf of returnees but is not currently encouraging refugees to return given the uncertainty of the security situation. Foley reviewed U.S. refugee resettlement efforts, noting that we had already admitted nearly 3000 of the 12,000 authorized for FY 2008. This follows 1600 admitted in 2007. He also recounted the history of our refugee processing efforts in Syria, which have been hampered by the difficult state of U.S./Syrian relations.

¶6. (SBU) Turning to the rationale for his latest trip to the Middle East and Europe, Foley explained that he was encouraging donor countries to respond to the estimated USD 900 million needed this year to deal with the Iraqi refugee situation (per reftel, which embassy had already passed to the MFA). UNHCR alone privately estimates it will need nearly double the amount of its USD 261 million regional appeal for Iraqi refugees. Foley spoke of a worsening humanitarian situation, especially in Syria and Jordan, and the unusual aspects of this refugee crisis, which involved a middle class population living not in camps but in urban areas. This makes it harder to count, track, and care for the refugees. Many are inexorably becoming impoverished as they exhaust savings and because of limitations on their ability to work in the host countries. Foley underscored the potential risk of instability to the hosting countries and to Iraq should the refugees be forced to return home. In Syria alone, the UNHCR expects a doubling of daily food assistance from 150,000 to 300,000 persons.

¶7. (SBU) Convincing the Gulf states to increase or even offer assistance has been a challenge, Foley continued.

Many of those governments opposed the 2003 war or have strained relations with the current Iraqi government. They believe the GOI should be able to do more itself with its oil revenues. We hope that the increasing urgency of the situation may motivate at least some of the wealthy Arab states to contribute despite their misgivings about the Maliki government. Foley noted our concern as well about the EU response, which may in part be due to inaccurate information about the refugee situation. The EU contributed 66 million euros last year, and we hope that will be increased. In that context, we would welcome French support for increased EU assistance in addition to any further bilateral assistance it could contribute.

¶8. (SBU) When Bigot asked whether we wanted to see the EU maintain its current level, Foley rejoined that we frankly hoped to see the EU increase substantially its current level of aid. Giacomini argued there was little current fiscal room for maneuver in terms of French bilateral assistance (currently one million euros for Iraqi refugees via UNHCR). He pointed to other pressing needs at the moment like Chad. Giacomini and Bigot said France would consult with RELEX and ECHO, but there were budget problems across the board in Europe among EU member states that will make any increase problematic.

¶9. (SBU) Foley expressed appreciation for France's help and engagement on this issue, underscoring its importance to the Secretary. He repeated concerns about how the

PARIS 00000681 003 OF 003

refugee situation potentially threatened regional stability as well as security conditions inside Jordan and Syria. This had terrorism and other potential implications. The USG would welcome France using its weight in Brussels to obtain more financial assistance. Foley also suggested that assistance to refugees was a natural area where the GOI could realize its desire to contribute on Iraq matters. Bigot concluded that Kouchner is very aware of the situation and is likely to raise it at the upcoming Iraq neighbors conference in Kuwait.

¶10. (U) Ambassador Foley cleared this cable.

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